

'Amateur' pros giving country a bad name

Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

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REVELATIONS in recent times of unprofessional conduct and behaviour by professionals and intellectuals have caused embarrassment, not only to the fraternity but the country as well.

Those involved are well-educated and are expected to set good examples.

To quote the Dalai Lama on his installation as a teaching professor at Emory University, Atlanta, last week; "Education paired with destructive behaviour is wasted."

This cannot be more true for those who have intentionally or otherwise, fallen on the wayside.

At times when Malaysia is intensely debating building human capital with first-class mentality, the revelation is more than a letdown.

Perhaps this is the time to cast our mind to Sept 25, 2003, the day intellectuals and professionals the world over mourned the loss of an exemplary and valued member of the fraternity, Prof Edward W. Said.

Said died of leukaemia while serving as a University Professor of English and Comparative Literature, the most prestigious position at the University of Columbia. His many writings and scholarly works will remain as one of the legacies of the intellectual world.

He was author of more than 20 books in more than 30 languages, some of which are better known to us — Orientalism (1978) and Covering Islam 1997).

Of relevance to the present discussion is another of his book, Representations of the Intellectual (1994).

In it he explores the implications of speaking the truth and shows what happens when intellectuals succumb to the lures of money, power and "specialisation".

It is in an attitude that he labels "professionalism", by which he means "thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock - not rocking the boat, not straying outside paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and, above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and 'objective'".

He further suggests the pressures which challenge the ingenuity and will of Intellectuals, namely, "specialisation", referring to the relatively narrow scope of knowledge one is limited to, as one climbs higher on the educational ladder.

It is not the specialised competence that worries him, but "losing sight of anything outside one's immediate field". According to Said, that sort of competence is not worth the price.

Said was also an accomplished musician who not only published on music but participated in Beethoven's Fidelio, and performed with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He was also a regular columnist and contributor to leading newspapers.

Closely linked to specialisation is the notion of "expertise and the cult of the certified expert" in the postwar world.

Being certified connotes that one is instructed in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory.

In the end, "expertise" has rather little to do with knowledge.

More often than not, the little intellectual space left for reflection is squeezed out in a system that rewards conformity.

This is compounded by what he describes as "the inevitable drift towards power and authority in its adherents, towards the requirements and prerogatives of power, and towards being directly employed by it".

As an option, Said prefers the term "amateurism" in so far as it is not moved by profit or reward, but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in caring for ideas and values and not being tied down to the specialty of a discipline.

He is categorical in asserting that "amateurism" is fuelled by care and affection, rather than by profit and selfishness and specialisation.

Throughout the book he is consistent in suggesting that "the intellectual does not represent a statue-like icon, but an individual vocation, an energy, a stubborn force engaging as a committed and recognisable voice in language and in society with a whole slew of issues, all of them having to do in the end with a combination of enlightenment and emancipation or freedom".

Said tried as humanly possible to be honest and committed to the principles of an "amateur" intellectual, making him such a rare intellectual giant.

His intellectual honesty should be enough of an inspiration for us in trying to establish a firm tradition and consciousness of Intellectuals as the next phase of human capital development in Malaysia.

It is by no means easy as reminded by Said: "The hardest aspect of being an intellectual is to represent what you profess through your work and intervention, without hardening into an institution or a kind of automaton acting at the behest of a system or method."

Worse still, if it is only a facade to merely feather one's nest.

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